1. The Annunciation to the Shepherds, from The Macclesfield Psalter, f. 139v upper part.


3. Detail from a Latin pontifical. Italian, c. 1435-40, lower part of f. 1r, illustrated in the exhibition catalog in the essay introducing the section on “The Liturgy and the Offices” (f. 135v from the MS will be on display in this section at The Fitzwilliam Museum).
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The Illuminated Manuscripts of Cambridge

Our Cantabrigian correspondent doesn’t have to travel far to report on a remarkable exhibit of illuminated manuscripts and other treasures of musical iconography.

In Cambridge, England, this year, The Fitzwilliam Museum and Cambridge University Library are jointly putting on a spectacular exhibition of illuminated manuscripts entitled The Cambridge Illuminations. Many of these works have never before been publicly displayed, since they belong privately to the colleges. The biggest surprise among them is the splendid Macclesfield Psalter, an East Anglian manuscript with 252 leaves. It is regarded as the most important discovery of any English illuminated manuscript in living memory and has only very recently been acquired by The Fitzwilliam Museum with the aid of many generous donations.

Although they date from around 1320-30, the illuminations are in very good condition. They have full-length decorated borders on the left-hand margin of every page, as well as illuminated initials and other miniatures. The many hundreds of marginal scenes and vignettes include grotesques and pigs playing trumpets, a rabbit at the organ while a subservient hound blows the bellows (an example of role reversal!), a couple dancing with a dog to the tune of a flute, and a rabbit blowing a hunting horn – presumably to chase both hounds and peasants playing bagpipes. Other scenes are decidedly scatological, despite the sanctity of the text. The patron of the illustrator was reputed to be the libertine eighth Earl of Warren, which would account for the multiplicity of rabbits. The quality of the illuminations as a whole shows the genius of a breathtaking artist.

Illustration 1 from the Psalter is The Annunciation to the Shepherds, illuminating the capital C, which starts Psalm 97 at folio 139v. The third shepherd, in a continuation of a Byzantine tradition, sits lost in the music of his bagpipe. His instrument, like many early bagpipes, has no drones, but the vielle at the extreme left of this photograph could play both a melody and an open-string drone together using a long bow with variable tension controlled by the right-hand fingers.

Illustration 2 shows four roundels from an English Psalter of a hundred years earlier, of which only seven leaves survive, six at The Fitzwilliam Museum, the other in the Pierpont Morgan Library of New York. This is a genealogical Tree of Jesse, illuminated by William de Brailes. The four corner roundels show a vielle, a psaltery, a harp, and an organistrum, a long Medieval hurdy-gurdy that required the skill of two angels to operate it, one to crank the wheel and the other to manipulate the key-rods to push the strings down onto the revolving wheel. These four instruments quite frequently appear in Medieval illuminations of the musical King David, the son of Jesse.

The beautiful image in Illustration 3 is at the foot of the first page of a Latin pontifical illuminated by the Master of the Vitae Imperatorum in Milan or Pavia around 1435-40. The pairing and attitude of the angels is remarkably similar to those found in later oil paintings, for example, the angels at the foot of the Virgin in Giovanni Bellini’s triptych in the Frari church at Venice. The instrument at the right is a gittern. The one on the left has insufficient detail for clear identification: it could be a shawm or a recorder, but the shawm is a “haut” instrument and the recorder “bas,” and at least until the early 15th-century, loud and soft instruments did not actually perform together. Recorder and gittern blend well – they had been played in home music-making by the Earl of Derby (later King Henry IV) and his wife.

Nearly 100 of the illuminations are newly available to the public. They come from the libraries of 15 Cambridge colleges. Be on the lookout for one from Newnham College (MS 5, folio 36v) in which a nonchalant Orpheus, seated, plays a harp while looking at Eurydice, who stands naked in the very jaws of hell.

Together with another 100 from The Fitzwilliam Museum and Cambridge University Library, the colleges’ illuminations will be shown in those two venues under thematic headings such as “The Bible and Its Study,” “Private Devotion” (e.g. Books of Hours), and “The Medieval Encyclopaedia: Science and Practice,” which includes bestiaries, herbals, astronomy, and medicine.

The first in this latter group, appropriately an ancient manuscript from the early 12th century, is a MS of De musica.
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by Boethius (Illustration 4). Boethius wrote in the early 6th century about classical theories of music, disregarding its practice – playing music was the job of slaves. His philosophical treatise was lost and then rediscovered in the early Middle Ages when, as the psalmist tells us, plainchant and music-making were undertaken for the glory of God. Boethius is therefore shown plucking a monochord, which, however, is marked by letters relating to the modes he had described. At the top right is Pythagoras, who discovered the proportions of music by the weights of four different hammers used to chime bells; he has discarded a fifth hammer, which was discordant. At the bottom, Plato and Nicomachus, who at different periods wrote on musical harmony, debate across the centuries their opposing viewpoints. A full account of this illumination appears in Elizabeth C. Teviotdale’s chapter “Music and Pictures in the Middle Ages” in Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music, edited by Tess Knighton and David Fallows (London: J. M. Dent, 1992).

Several of the manuscripts show written music of their periods, but they do so without depictions of musical instruments. If such representations are thought to be in rather short supply in this superb exhibition, this is certainly not the case with The Fitzwilliam Museum itself, recently beautifully extended and re-organized. Its collections are regarded as the foremost in England, outside of London, and include some 60 representations of musical instruments, half in a fine collection of porcelain figurines, and half spread across the paintings.

Like those in the National Gallery in London, the paintings are equally representative of all periods of art and all countries, although one can pick out the Italian late Medieval and Renaissance holdings and the French Impressionists, Degas and Renoir especially. The museum possesses two of Renoir’s best works, my favorite being The Gust of
Wind. The Fitzwilliam also holds a lugubrious portrait by Frans Hals and a fine one of a soldier “attributed to” (in my view, “by”) Rembrandt. A beautiful painting by Terbruggen on long-term loan – matching his lute player shown as Illustration 2 in last year’s Stockholm “Art Off the Beaten Track” (EMAg Summer 2004) – shows a player in the process of tuning a lute, listening with rapt intensity and illustrating the sense of hearing. The celestial harmony of perfect tuning was regarded as more significant than the sounds made by actually playing the lute.

Many visitors would choose a painting containing musical symbolism as the museum’s most outstanding: this work appears as Illustration 5 and is the penultimate in Titian’s series of reclining Venus pictures originating from his teacher and colleague Giorgione’s Sleeping Venus, which is in the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden. We shall meet another in Berlin in the next installment of “Art Off the Beaten Track.” The final in the series, not quite finished for some unknown reason, is the “Holkham Venus” in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

These last two make an interesting comparison. Why, for example, did Titian lower the final painting’s horizontals? Venus herself represents both spiritual and physical love (Titian’s Sacred and Profane Love in another picture), through the “circle of music,” of which she is a part, and the mingled roses and myrtle of her coronet. Roses symbolize transient love, myrtle, the permanence of marriage. The goddess Venus embodies supreme femininity and encompasses all aspects of love and music – high and low, all voices, plucked and bowed strings, and wind instruments. If you follow down her left arm (left being regarded as the female side), her hand sensuously fingers a single recorder, symbol of male eroticism. The recorder points to the

5. Titian (c.1488/90-1576), Venus Crowned by Cupid, with a Lute Player (c.1555-65).
5a. BASUS music-book, inverted.
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male (tenor and bass) partbooks of a madrigal of love, and the bass partbook is open to show its music. This imagery is consolidated firstly by the large bass viol and secondly by Titian's having deliberately used the rare F5 bass clef, which was only occasionally employed for the deepest bass voices and instruments, and never in four-part madrigals. The music, shown in the small picture, has no time signature, so it cannot be an actual madrigal. Following Venus's outstretched left leg, which points meaningfully towards a dagger, the line is then turned back by the lutenist's elbow and the angle of the lute's pegboard to its fingerboard, leading to the unseen body of the lute cradled by the player's right arm. The lute is a female symbol both of love (its sounds) and pregnancy (its shape). The music lies on a ledge, which takes our eyes back to Venus herself. The glance of the young acolyte player, desiring but awed, also returns us to Venus's majestic head, the climax of the composition. To emphasize the importance of music in this picture, Titian has signed his name on the cover of one of the partbooks.

Claude Lorrain's pictures are primari-

6. Claude Lorrain (1604/5-1682), detail of a group of shepherds and shepherdesses at bottom right of A Pastoral Landscape with Lake Albano and Castel Gondolfo (the Pope's country residence).
If You Go

From Easter to August, the streets of Cambridge are heavily trodden by tourists and large groups of language school students, the latter rarely speaking English. In July and August, Cambridge is less tourist-ridden than Oxford, but you’ll still find visitors inexpertly bicycling about. In September, the city becomes more peaceful—idyllic if you stay in a riverside hotel. In October, some 20,000 students return, but they are the reason Cambridge exists. This English city has the lowest average rainfall in the country, and the autumn weather is generally very pleasant.

The exhibition will run from July 26 to December 11; like The Fitzwilliam Museum itself, entry is free. Both are open each Tuesday to Saturday from 10 to 5 and on Sunday from 12 to 5; they are closed on Monday. The Cambridge University Library part of the exhibition is open Monday to Friday from 9 to 7 and on Saturday from 9 to 5.

ly landscapes, for which he is renowned. If any small population of shepherds can be found in them, and they play music, their instruments are painted so small that recognition is difficult. This is not quite the case, however, with the group from the Claude landscape in The Fitzwilliam Museum (Illustration 6), where a shepherd has a transverse flute (though he is distracted from actually playing it), and his shepherdess plays what is probably a recorder. These two instruments were not usually played together, although Telemann and others did write for this combination during the short period of the 18th century when they were both in equal favor. It is said that Claude showed the instruments more clearly because the painting was for a music-lover, Pope Urban VIII.

My final illustration (7) is almost all music, a rather curious combination of voice, organ, harp, bass viol, and trombone. Albani, a Bolognese painter, was famed for his charming cherubs, for which each of his 12 children, in turn, served as models.

The Fitzwilliam Museum offers a program of music recitals in its galleries....
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and spaces, some of which are presided over by Roubiliac’s terra cotta model (1738) for his bust of Handel, as the god Apollo. The work was designed for Vauxhall Gardens, and the finished work is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum of London. It reminds us that among many other special collections—fans, Rembrandt prints, and Japanese art, for example—the museum has a large number of Handel autographs, including those of his sonatas for violin, flute, and recorder, with basso continuo. A museum known for its musical possessions is a fine compliment to a city as musical as Cambridge.

Anthony Rowland-Jones writes on the subjects of recorder and music iconography for a number of publications. He wishes to acknowledge the help of the staff of The Fitzwilliam Museum, especially Stella Panayotova, keeper of manuscripts and printed books, and David Scrase, keeper of paintings, drawings, and prints. Illustrations 1-3 and 5-7 are museum photographs specially prepared for this article; they are reproduced by permission of the Syndics of The Fitzwilliam Museum. Illustration 4 is reproduced by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.